

ANALYSIS OF EVALUATION SURVEY RESULTS FOR THE 2005 NEW ENGLAND VALUE-ADDED MEAT AND POULTRY PRODUCTS WORKSHOPS

Background:

In the summer and fall of 2005 the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, in conjunction with the other five New England State Departments of Agriculture, sponsored the New England Value-Added Meat and Poultry Workshop Series. This was funded through assistance provided by the US Department of Agriculture.

The following are the results of a survey that was sent to all of the workshop participants and follow-up interviews with workshop participants and presenters.

Overview:

Overall, respondents stated that the Value-Added Workshop Series is well-managed, accessible and affordable for attendees. Highlights from the survey include:

- 79% of workshop attendees rated their experience as “excellent”
- 82% of workshop attendees were more interested in producing value-added products after attending workshops
- 65% prefer hands-on workshops
- 76% need technical assistance to reach their goals
- 65% desire greater infrastructure in the processing sector
- 82% of respondents said that the farm is not their primary source of income, and of those, 64% would like it to be
- Lack of capital and technical skills are the biggest reasons that farms are not the primary source of income
- 50% response rate on surveys sent out

Observations:

Farmers see diversification and production of value-added meat products as a key to running a successful farm business. The biggest obstacles keeping farmers from reaching their goals are lack of capital and access to technical assistance. Large scale farming operations continue to have a distinct financial advantage in the marketplace, hence it is the small/family farms that are in particular need of assistance.

The Value-Added Workshop Series was well run and popular. Suggestions for future programs:

- More technical/hands-on courses, instead of the tours of existing facilities
- More business courses (e.g. farm/business management, culinary cost control)
- Focus on holding workshops in mid-winter and mid-summer when farmers have more time to attend
- Consider a 1 day conference that covers many workshop topics
- Work towards greater New England participation
- Offer workshops to train processors in production of value-added products
- Involve more non-farmers: chefs, students and business people

Additional value-added meat courses to consider offering:

- Food handling/HAACP
- Food cost/pricing
- Marketing
- Recipe development/cooking skills
- Farm business management
- Technical hands-on courses:
 1. Sausage making
 2. Hands-on slaughtering/butchering
 3. Food science in value-added meat production
 4. Jerky making
 5. Meat processing equipment education
 6. Build your own smoker

Obstacles farmers are facing in producing value-added products:

- Financing to expand farm facilities
- Technical skills (e.g. butchering, food science, culinary, food handling, food cost)
- Number of, proximity to, and services offered by processing facilities
- Regulations - both burden of and confusion by
- Difficulties running both a farm and processing value-added foods
- Creating a unique sustainable product to bring to market

Consider other (non-meat) value-added programs:

- Agritourism
- Organic/Natural/Grass fed
- Beekeeping
- Orchard management and value-added products
- Produce (e.g. pickles and preserves, pies and other culinary creations)
- Dairy/cheese making

Suggestions for Legislative/Regulatory changes:

- Greater access to Vermont meat processing facilities, particularly facilities offering value-added production
- Small scale processor allowances for farmhouse production of value-added products
- Lowered agricultural land-use threshold based on use and production instead of acreage
- GMO legislation, including protection for farmers
- Careful consideration of electronic livestock ID program and its impact on farmers
- Less, not more regulation-too much is being put on the shoulders of farmers.

Some additional specific suggestions made by workshop participants:

- A hot dog processing facility in Vermont would be a welcome addition to our infrastructure
- Mentor/Advocate program to help farms transition their businesses and achieve goals (similar to SBA/SCORE program to help mentor small businesses)

- Farmer's cooperative to produce a Vermont Label of value added meat products, similar to the St. Albans Cooperative Creamery
- Regulations allowing small scale "farmhouse" production
- FAQ sheet on regulations affecting farmers & processing facilities

Conclusion:

Overwhelmingly, workshop participants found the Value-Added Workshop Series to be a valuable resource. Farmers undoubtedly prefer hands-on workshops as a way to receive information. Although most of the survey respondents said that the farm was not their primary source of income, they indicated that they would like it to be. Product diversification and vertical integration on the farm can enhance the profitability of a farm business. Value-added meat products are a good example of this. The survey results clearly indicate that Vermont farmers would like to see educational opportunities, such as the Value-Added Workshop Series, be offered in the future.

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